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Hugh Blair, the Sentiments and
Preaching the Enlightenment in Scotland

Stewart J Brown

The five volumes of sermons by the Edinburgh Church of Scotland minister, Hugh Blair, represented one of the most successful publishing projects of the eighteenth-century Scottish Enlightenment. According to the *Critical Review* of 1807, Blair's sermons were (apart from the *Spectator*), 'the most popular work in the English language'.¹ As Richard Sher has demonstrated in his monumental *The Enlightenment and the Book*, the popularity of Blair's sermons, published between 1777 and 1801, was 'astonishing'. By 1790, the first two volumes of his sermons had gone through fifteen editions. The sermons were soon translated into French, German, Dutch and other European languages. Blair received no less than £2,765 for the five volumes, and probably far more in the form of unrecorded 'presents' from the publisher. He became one of the wealthiest clergymen in the Church of Scotland, and the first to maintain a private carriage; he had two homes, a large library and left some £4,000 in bonds at his death.² For Anne Matheson, only John Tillotson in England could rival Blair as the most published sermon-writer of the eighteenth century.³

What accounts for the extraordinary popularity of Blair's sermons? And what does this popularity tell us about the nature of the later Enlightenment in Scotland, and especially about the place of sensibility and the passions in later Enlightenment thought? While no doubt some of the volumes sat prominently displayed (but unread)

¹ Quoted in R. B. Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book: Scottish Authors and their Publishers in Eighteenth-Century Britain, Ireland and America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 33.

² *Ibid.*, 33, 245-7.

³ A. Matheson, *Theories of Rhetoric in the 18th-Century Scottish Sermon* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1995), 38.

in fashionable homes as a sign of good taste and religious moderation, the continuing high sales and frequent translations suggests that the sermons were also widely read and appreciated. What was it in the style and content of these sermons that attracted so many readers in the later eighteenth century?

Hugh Blair was a prominent Presbyterian clergyman and the first Regius Professor of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres at the University of Edinburgh. He was one of the inner circle of Moderate literati – the group of urban clerical intellectuals portrayed so vividly by the historian Richard Sher – who provided leadership in the Scottish established Church, universities and civic society from the 1750s, helping to move Scottish society away from the rigid and intolerant Calvinism of the seventeenth century to a religious ethos that accepted, even embraced, social improvement, polite manners, toleration and new approaches to the study of nature and society. He was an exemplar of what is now termed the ‘religious Enlightenment’, a movement of Christian and Jewish thinkers across Europe and North America who accepted the priorities of the Enlightenment – the elevated view of the capacities of human reason, confidence in the methods of the new science, and critical attitudes towards traditional authorities – while at the same time retaining faith in a transcendent God, a belief that the Scriptures contained divine revelation, and confidence in a providential ordering of the universe. For thinkers of the religious Enlightenment, there was a middle way between unqualified confidence in the powers of human reason and uncritical acceptance of an infallible Scripture or Church. It was possible to have a reasonable faith that the laws governing nature and society were created by God, and that the divine purposes were revealed in nature and conscience, as well as in Scripture.⁴

⁴ D. Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 1-21; H. Rosenblatt, ‘The Christian Enlightenment’, in S. J. Brown and T. Tackett (eds.), *Enlightenment, Reawakening and Revolution, 1660-1815, Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006),

Blair was the subject of a sympathetic biography by a friend, John Hill, published in 1807, seven years after his death, and of a brief, but well-researched biography published in 1948 by Robert Morell Schmitz, a scholar of literature. Schmitz's biography focused largely on Blair's contributions to the scholarly study of rhetoric and literature, but gave little attention to the sermons.⁵ More recently, Richard Sher has explored Blair's central place among the Moderate literati in his path-breaking *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment* (1985). He focused on Blair's contributions in shaping a distinctive Moderate social morality, which he aptly described as 'Christian stoicism', and he analysed Blair's key role in the controversy surrounding the Ossian poems and the Moderate efforts to shape a Scottish literary nationalism.⁶ John Dwyer has discussed Blair's contributions to the emphasis on sensibility and the passions in the later Scottish Enlightenment in several valuable studies, especially his important book, *Virtuous Discourse*, of 1987.⁷ Anne Matheson and Alan Brinkman have considered the rhetoric of sensibility and pathos in Blair's sermons.⁸ This article will explore further Blair's sermons as expressions of the religious Enlightenment in late eighteenth-century Reformed Scotland, giving

283-301; R. Sullivan, 'Rethinking Christianity in Enlightened Europe', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 34:2 (2001), 298-309; J. I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 11.

⁵ J. Hill, *An Account of the Life and Writings of Hugh Blair* (Edinburgh, 1807); R. M. Schmitz, *Hugh Blair* (Morningside Heights, NY: King's Crown Press, 1948).

⁶ R. B. Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment: The Moderate Literati of Edinburgh* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985); see also Sher's informative brief article, 'Blair, Hugh', in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 60 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), vol. 6, 79-82.

⁷ J. Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse: Sensibility and Community in Late Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: John Donald, 1987); Dwyer also discusses Blair and sensibility in *The Age of the Passions: An Interpretation of Adam Smith and Scottish Enlightenment Culture* (East Linton, Tuckwell, 1998), and in 'Enlightened Spectators and Classical Moralists: Sympathetic Relations in Eighteenth-Century Scotland', in J. Dwyer and R. B. Sher (eds.), *Sociability and Society in Eighteenth-Century Scotland* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 1993), 96-118.

⁸ Matheson, *Theories of Rhetoric in the 18th-Century Scottish Sermon*, especially 191-213; A. Brinton, 'Hugh Blair and the True Eloquence', *Rhetorical Society Quarterly*, 22 (1992), 30-42; C. R. McCain, 'Preaching in Eighteenth Century Scotland: A Comparative Study of the Extant Sermons of Ralph Erskine, John Erskine and Hugh Blair' (Unpublished University of Edinburgh PhD thesis, 1949). For a brief overview of Blair's preaching, see also J. L. Golden, 'Hugh Blair: Minister of St Giles', *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 38 (1952), 155-60.

particular attention to his treatment of the passions and sentiment within the Reformed Christian tradition. Blair, I will suggest, was in many respects a transitional figure, pointing to a new religious sense of the sublime in nature and to the intense religion of the heart that would be associated with Romanticism.

Hugh Blair and the Scottish Enlightenment

Hugh Blair was born in 1718 in Edinburgh, the eldest son of an Edinburgh merchant whose business had been largely ruined a result of the South Sea Bubble, though he remained sufficiently solvent to provide his son with a sound education. The family was staunchly Presbyterian; Blair's great-grandfather was Robert Blair, a leading Calvinist theologian and a Covenanter, who had suffered for his opposition to royal supremacy over the Church. Young Blair was educated at the High School in Edinburgh and then, from October 1730, at the University of Edinburgh, where he was profoundly influenced by the professor of logic and metaphysics, John Stevenson, whose classes emphasised rhetoric and literary criticism. Among Stevenson's texts was the classical study of aesthetics, *On the Sublime*, then (wrongly) attributed to the third century Greek philosopher Cassius Longinus.⁹ Blair graduated MA in 1739, submitting and publishing, as part of his work for the degree, a Latin thesis entitled *De Fundamentis et Obligatione Legis Naturae* (*The Foundations and Obligations of Natural Law*), in which he argued that the sentiment of benevolence is rooted in natural law and that the materialism of Thomas Hobbes constituted a fundamental threat to both morality and civil society.¹⁰

In 1741, Blair was licensed as a probationer minister of the Church of Scotland, and in 1742, through the patronage of the Earl of Leven, he was ordained to

⁹ Schmitz, *Hugh Blair*, 11-13, Matheson, *Theories of Rhetoric*, 85-6.

¹⁰ H. Blair, *Dissertatio Philosophica Inauguralis, de Fundamentis & Obligatione Legis Naturæ* (Edinburgh, 1739).

the small Fife parish of Collesie. Within a year, he was presented by the Edinburgh magistrates and town council, after a closely contested election, to the second charge of the Canongate church in Edinburgh. He spent eleven years at the Canongate, earning a reputation for pulpit eloquence and becoming part of a small circle of Moderate ministers, including William Robertson, John Home and Alexander Carlyle, who were committed to strengthening the alliance of Church and state, and promoting a culture of improvement. He was presented by the Edinburgh magistrates and town council to the more prestigious Lady Yester's church, near the College, in 1754 and then, in 1758, to the second charge of the High Church, or St Giles, where he remained until his death. From the pulpit of St Giles, Blair would for some four decades exercise a profound influence on the city's commercial and professional elite.

Blair took an active role in the literary and cultural life of the city, including the literary and debating societies that gave expression to the city's enlightened culture and promoted public eloquence. He was a member of the Select Society, the Society for the Reading and Speaking of the English Language, the Revolution Club, the *Belle Lettres* Society, the Oyster Club, and the Poker Club, and he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh at its foundation in 1783. His early and close friendships included David Hume, William Robertson, Adam Smith, and John Home. He was one of the authors of the short-lived *Edinburgh Review* of 1755-56, and he evidently contributed four or five review articles. These included a review of Francis Hutcheson's posthumous *System of Moral Philosophy*, in which Blair lauded the late Hutcheson's character, but criticised his style of for being too academic in tone to serve as a practical guide for moral living.¹¹ In 1755, he defended his friends, Lord Kames and David Hume, against an effort by conservative Calvinist clerics to

¹¹ *Edinburgh Review*, 1 (1755), 9-23; Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 68-70.

have them tried in the Church of Scotland courts for their allegedly infidel and immoral writings. An anonymous pamphlet in support of Kames and Hume, attributed to Blair, maintained that intellectual freedom, including the ‘freedom of inquiry and debate’, was a vital principle of the Reformation.¹² In 1761, Hume made it a condition of their continued friendship that Blair cease seeking to bring him back to the Christian faith, a condition that Blair apparently accepted.¹³

In the early 1760s, Blair took up the cause of the former divinity student, James Macpherson, who claimed to have discovered authentic fragments of Gaelic epic poetry from an ancient iron-age civilisation in the Scottish Highlands.¹⁴ The first of these works, *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland*, was published in late 1760 in Edinburgh, with an eight-page preface by Blair, in which he directed attention to both the antiquity and the simple beauty of the poetry.¹⁵ Blair helped to raise funds to support Macpherson’s further researches in the Highlands, assisted Macpherson in editing the verses, and defended the genuineness of the poetry in a *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* which first appeared in 1763. Blair’s *Critical Dissertation* was an eloquent and impassioned apology for primitive innocence. For him, the ancient Celtic society depicted in the surviving poetic fragments of Ossian was infused with ‘a glowing and undisciplined imagination’; moreover, the fragments carried ‘a remarkable resemblance to the style of the Old Testament’. The Ossian poems combined ‘tenderness and sublimity’,

¹² [H. Blair], *Observations upon a Pamphlet, intitled An Analysis of the Moral and Religious Sentiments contained in the Writings of Sopho, and David Hume* (Edinburgh, 1755).

¹³ Hume to Blair, [1761], in *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J.Y.T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), vol. 1, 348-51.

¹⁴ For Blair’s leading role in the Ossian controversy, see J. Dwyer, ‘The Melancholy Savage: Text and Context in the Poem of Ossian’; S. Rizza, ‘A Bulky and Foolish Treatise? Hugh Blair’s *Critical Dissertation* Reconsidered’; and R. B. Sher, ‘Percy, Shaw and the Ferguson ‘Cheat’: National Prejudice in the Ossian Wars’, in H. Gaskell (ed.), *Ossian Revisited* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991), 129-46, 164-206, 207-45; Schmitz, *Hugh Blair*, 42-60.

¹⁵ [H. Blair], Preface, [J. Macpherson], *Fragments of Ancient Poetry, Collected in the Highlands of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1760), i-viii.

while their depictions of nature were ‘wild and romantic’: they were truly ‘*The Poetry of the Heart*’.¹⁶ Believing that all language originated in ‘strong, primitive emotions’, Blair maintained that the impassioned language of Ossian was proof of its antiquity, and that it provided valuable insights into early human culture.¹⁷ The *Critical Dissertation* established for Blair a European reputation as a literary critic. ‘Some People who have read your Dissertation’, wrote Hume from Paris in April 1764, ‘affirmed to me, that it was the finest Piece of Criticism incomparably to be found in the English Tongue’.¹⁸ The work did much to promote the Ossian cult in Germany, France and England; it was reprinted regularly through the remainder of the eighteenth century, often as a preface to editions of the Ossian poetry.

Blair had begun presenting public lectures on rhetoric and literature in Edinburgh from late 1759.¹⁹ There was a demand for such lectures among members of the Edinburgh social elite who were anxious to demonstrate their cultivation and good taste, and to communicate in a ‘proper’ English that would enhance their prospects within the Union state and empire. The following year, the Edinburgh town council and magistrates appointed Blair as an unsalaried professor of rhetoric at the University, with the right to collect fees from students. In 1762, apparently through the influence of the young Henry Dundas, the Crown endowed for Blair a new regius professorship of Rhetoric and Belles Lettres. Blair’s lectures included expositions on taste, sentence structure and English usage, public oratory, philosophical writing, historical writing, and poetry, with copious illustrations and critical commentary on

¹⁶ H. Blair, *A Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian, the Son of Fingal*, 2nd edn. (London, 1765), 33, 36, 37.

¹⁷ J. V. Price, ‘Ossian and the Canon in the Scottish Enlightenment’, in Gaskell (ed.), *Ossian Revisited*, p. 111.

¹⁸ Hume to Blair, 26 April 1764, in *Letters of David Hume*, vol. 1, 436.

¹⁹ Adam Smith had given public lectures on rhetoric in Edinburgh from 1748-1751, probably at the Philosophical Society of Edinburgh. When Smith accepted a chair at Glasgow, the lectures were given by Robert Watson, until he went to an academic chair at St Andrews in 1756. Matheson, *Theories of Rhetoric*, 86-7.

various authors. They promoted the notion, so important in the Scottish Enlightenment, that eloquence was a key attribute of the public-spirited person.²⁰ Blair published his lectures in rhetoric, virtually unrevised, in two volumes in 1783. The work subsequently went through numerous editions in Britain and North America, becoming one of the most influential works on public oratory, literary style, and literary criticism in the English language.

‘After William Robertson’, John Dwyer has maintained, ‘Blair was probably the most important Moderate divine’.²¹ However, unlike Robertson, Blair did not take a prominent role in ecclesiastical politics and management.²² He was a warm supporter of the established order in Church, university and civic society, and both a Scottish patriot and loyal subject of the British imperial state. He was a moderate Whig in his politics and he opposed both the American and French Revolutions. He was also shy, highly sensitive and reserved by nature, and disliked confrontation. Blair took great pride in his reputation, was vain about his appearance, was well known for his carefully powdered wig and fastidious dress, and was susceptible to flattery, especially from women. According to his friend, Alexander Carlyle, Blair ‘was timid and unambitious, and withheld himself from public business of every kind, and seemed to have no wish but to be admired as a preacher, particularly by the ladies’.²³ He valued loyalty and his friendships, and was generous with his time, assisting his friends, among them Adam Smith and William Robertson, with revising their literary works; he also promoted and encouraged younger authors, including

²⁰ D. Allan, *Virtue, Learning and the Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1993), 188; T. P. Miller, ‘Witherspoon, Blair and the Rhetoric of Civic Humanism’, in R. B. Sher and J. R. Smitten (eds.), *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 100-14.

²¹ Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, 19.

²² For a balanced character sketch from one who knew him well, see J. Hill, *An Account of the Life and Writings of Hugh Blair* (Edinburgh, 1807), 157-85.

²³ A. Carlyle, *Autobiography of the Rev. Dr Alexander Carlyle*, ed. J. H. Burton (Edinburgh, 1860), 291.

James Macpherson, ‘Abyssinian’ James Bruce (the Scottish explorer), and the young Robert Burns.²⁴ He married his cousin, Katherine Bannatine, in 1748. They had a son, who died in infancy, and a daughter, ‘a young lady highly accomplished, and the darling of her parents’; when she died, aged only twenty, in 1769, Blair and his wife were both devastated, and their health suffered.²⁵ He had an excellent command of French and was an admirer of French preachers, especially their appeals to the emotions – in which he believed they were greatly superior to their British counterparts.²⁶

The First Published Sermons

It was through his sermons that Blair made his greatest impact on the religious Enlightenment in Scotland. These sermons were skilfully-crafted appeals to the emotions as well as the intellects of his hearers. They also served to communicate the ethos of the religious Enlightenment to the governing and social elite of the city – the aristocratic, commercial, and professional families, most of whom would not have read learned treatises in theology or moral philosophy. His delivery was, by all reports, not equal to the content of the sermons; according to one otherwise sympathetic hearer, he was ‘stiff, formal, and not altogether free from affectation’. A young English visitor complained that ‘his broad Scotch accent offends my ears greatly’.²⁷ He would write out his sermons, which could take him a full week, and then would memorise and deliver them from the pulpit without a text. Among his

²⁴ H. Blair to T. Cadell, 20 February 1794, British Library, Add. Ms. 28098, fols. 18-19; H. Blair to R. Burns, 4 May 1787, National Library of Scotland, Ms 3408, fols. 3-4; J. Delancey Fergusson, ‘Burns and Hugh Blair’, *Modern Language Notes*, 45:7 (1930), 440-6; M. Bredin, *The Pale Abyssinian: A Life of James Bruce* (London: Harper Collins, 2000), 259.

²⁵ T. Somerville, *My Own Life and Times 1741-1814* (Edinburgh, 1861), 166-7.

²⁶ Hill, *Life and Writings of Hugh Blair*, 131-48.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 57; Matheson, *Theories of Rhetoric*, 157.

early published works were two sermons, which introduced what would be the characteristic themes of his later preaching.

In May 1746, at the age of twenty-eight, Blair was selected – probably through the influence of his patron, the earl of Leven – to preach before the Lord High Commissioner at the first meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland following the defeat of the Jacobite rising. In this sermon, published as *The Wrath of Man Praising God*, he endeavoured to show how in the recent rebellion God had used the ‘the unruly Passions of bad Men’, including their rage, envy, hatred and love of cruelty in order to advance, ‘in a secret Way’, the providential purposes for the world.²⁸ These purposes included calling a nation back to the cause of righteousness, summoning good men to martyrdom in the service of divine truth, inspiring good men to stand firm in resisting tyranny, and destroying ‘ambitious and violent Men’ by setting them in violence against one another.

Human affairs, insisted Blair, were a tumultuous sea of swirling passions, which found expression in plots, rebellion, and war; but amid the apparent chaos, there was divine order and direction. ‘These *Storms*, which Ambition and Pride raise among Mankind, [God] permits, with the same Intention, that he sends forth *Tempests* and *Hurricanes* amongst the Elements; to clear the Atmosphere of noxious Vapours, and purify it from that *Corruption* which all Things contract by too much Rest’.²⁹ Blair’s was an active God, who continually intervened in nature and history. ‘Of him we are to conceive not as removed from this World; sitting, a mere Spectator of his Creatures, in his high Abode: but as an omnipresent Spirit, *pervading, directing* and *regulating* all; ever busy without *Toil*, and working without *Weariness*! Nothing is

²⁸ H. Blair, *The Wrath of Man Praising God. A Sermon preached in the High Church of Edinburgh, May 18th, 1746, before His Grace the Lord High Commissioner to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1746).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

void of him: even in the Passions and Ragings of Men, GOD is to be found: and when they think they guide themselves, his Hand controuls and guides them still.’³⁰ The sermon closed on a note of civic humanism. Blair maintained that God had allowed primitive and undisciplined Highlanders to over-run the civic society of Lowland Scotland, in order to convince the Scottish governing classes to relinquish their love of ‘*Luxury*’ and ‘*Corruption of Manners*’.³¹ Significantly, while his sermon denounced the Jacobite rising as the result of unbridled passions, Blair did not argue that all violent rebellion was wrong. On the contrary, perhaps in part in recognition of his great-grandfather’s Covenanted resistance and his own Whig principles, Blair discussed at length the instances in which a spirited resistance to corrupt authority had been justified, including the Dutch revolt (which had led to the rise of the Netherlands to prosperity and intellectual achievement), the Glorious Revolution in Britain (which brought liberty and stability), and the stand of the early Christian martyrs against pagan Rome (which had contributed to the spread of Christianity).

Blair preached the second of his published sermons, ‘The Importance of Religious Knowledge to the *Happiness of Mankind*’, before the Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge [SSPCK] at its annual meeting on 1 January 1750. Here he developed the argument that this world formed a ‘Course of Discipline’ for the development of human character, with its complex mixture of emotion and reason; human society was a process leading to ‘Improvement in Virtue’.³² Vital to this process was the role of religion in controlling the sentiments and passions in order to restrain vice and promote social harmony. The Christian message, he insisted, was aimed at ‘*purifying the Heart*’; indeed, only the ‘Perfection

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

³² H. Blair, *The Importance of Religious Knowledge to the Happiness of Mankind. A Sermon preached before the Society for Propagating Christian Knowledge: at their Anniversary Meeting in the High Church of Edinburgh, on Monday, January 1, 1750* (Edinburgh, 1750), 11.

of religious Influence' could discipline the passions and ensure a '*Dominion of the Temper*'.³³ 'Religion', he maintained, '*civilizes Mankind. It tames the Fierceness of their Passions, and wears off the Barbarity of their Manners*'.³⁴

Adopting the discourse of conjectural history, with its stages of human development, he insisted that some form of religion was necessary for bringing 'wandering and scattered Men unto Society' and laying the foundations of settled civilised life; it was an essential part of any 'Civil Polity' and was vital for 'learning', 'Useful Arts', and the taking of oaths, without which the rule of law is impossible. Without the constraints adopted through religious belief, he insisted, we would be prey to our passions – 'loose and lawless, abandoned to Rapine and Violence, to Perfidy and Treachery; deceiving and deceived; oppressing and oppressed; consumed by intestine Broils'.³⁵ He maintained that there was an innate religious propensity in human nature – 'a natural Preparation of the Mind for receiving some Impressions of religious Belief'.³⁶ However, this innate religious impulse would be likely, through the influence of the passions, to lead to wild enthusiasm, fear and superstition, unless it was disciplined by the authority of Scripture and the Church.

For Blair, the Scottish Highlands and Islands, the main mission field of the SSPCK, were home to '*rude and uncivilized*' inhabitants, who were prey to unruly and violent passions: it was a region 'where Society has scarcely got beyond its *Infant State*' and where 'designing men' used the unbridled passions of primitive clansmen – including 'slavish Dependence on their Chieftains', 'Rapine', love of violence, wrath and envy – in order to foment rebellion and spread 'Confusion and Terror'.³⁷ Only the spread of a moderate and reasonable religion, emphasising morality and self-

³³ *Ibid.*, 14, 16.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 23.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

discipline, would bring the unruly passions of the clans under control, and elevate Highland society to order and peace. Both sermons provided a much darker picture of Highland primitivism than Blair would convey some years later in his *Critical Dissertation on the Poems of Ossian* of 1763 – which was written, significantly, when the Highlands were no longer a threat to Lowland society.

Blair's first two published sermons focused on the human passions and on the dangers to social order when the passions were not restrained by conscience and the teachings of a moderate Christianity. Human passions could be a positive force – eliciting active expressions of loyalty, gratitude, humility, adoration, love of country, sacrifice, and domesticity. But when they were unbridled, the passions of envy, rage, malice, arrogance, domination, sexual lust, love of cruelty would destroy social bonds, overturn the due subordination of ranks, and shatter the foundations of civil society. Providence employed both the good and the bad passions in directing the course of human events, and the divine purpose for the improvement of society was achieved by bringing the passions under discipline and regularity.

In this emphasis on providence directing the passions for a higher social purpose, Blair's early sermons reflected a growing literature on the passions and affections in the early and mid-eighteenth century. A seminal work had been the Earl of Shaftesbury's seminal *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711), which portrayed human nature as driven by passions, affections and sentiments, only imperfectly controlled by reason. Frances Hutcheson's *Essay on the Passions* (1728) also explored the power of the passions, which he classified as both selfish passions and 'Publick Passions', with the latter being vital to the well-being and improvement of society, and inspiring acts of benevolence, heroism and self-sacrifice which served

the designs of providence.³⁸ David Hume had devoted Book Two of his great work, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739-40) to a study 'Of the Passions', exploring the role of the passions in shaping human character, and showing how they could dominate the human understanding and will. Indeed, Hume had famously advanced the proposition that 'Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them'.³⁹ Blair's early sermons also reflected the views of his close friend, Adam Smith, on the passions—views that would find expression several years later in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Smith had developed the arguments of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in the series of lectures on rhetoric and *belles lettres* that he delivered in Edinburgh between 1748 and 1751. Blair would no doubt have attended the lectures. Smith's influence on Blair is especially evident in Smith's discussion of the 'Unsocial Passions' and the 'Social Passions' and the ways in which both contributed to social improvement.⁴⁰ Blair's conception of God, moreover, shared much in common with Smith's description of the God of the ancient stoics – that is, of a 'wise, powerful, and good God' who employed the 'vices and follies of mankind' as much as their 'wisdom and their virtue' in the divine plan for the world.⁴¹

Blair's early sermons reflected a new discourse in mid-eighteenth-century Scotland, a discourse that John Dwyer has described as that of 'sensibility'.⁴² This included a shift away from the view that morality must rest upon the promise of reward and punishment in an afterlife, to the argument that virtuous actions brought

³⁸ F. Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passion and Affections* (London, 1728), especially 58-125; for a valuable discussion of Hutcheson on the passions and providence, see J. A. Harris, 'Religion in Hutcheson's Moral Philosophy', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 46:2 (2008), 205-22.

³⁹ D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 3 vols. (London, 1739-40), vol. 2, 248.

⁴⁰ A. Smith, *A Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759), pp. 67-93; J. Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions: An Interpretation of Adam Smith and Scottish Enlightenment Culture* (East Linton: Tuckwell, 1998), 14-21, 35-41.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 73-4.

⁴² Dwyer, *Virtuous Discourse*, 52-64.

rewards in this world through the social passions. The discourse of sensibility took diverse forms. In the pulpits, there was an increasing use of ‘the language of the heart’, and calls for benevolence and virtuous sensibility in this world. The Church of Scotland minister, John Home, wrote a tragedy, *Douglas*, which conveyed a stoic morality through sentiment and pathos; the play was first performed with great success in late 1756 in Edinburgh, to the ire of conservative clergy within the Church.⁴³ William Robertson’s *History of Scotland*, which appeared in 1759, skillfully evoked sentiments of pathos in order to evoke sympathy for the Roman Catholic Mary Stuart and promote religious toleration through historical understanding.⁴⁴ The Ossian poems, which were published from 1760, celebrated the sentiments of loyalty, gratitude, benevolence, sacrifice and romantic love in a pre-Christian context. From the middle of the century, explorations of the passions and sentiments were central to the Scottish Enlightenment’s study of human nature and society, and Hugh Blair was in the vanguard of this movement.

Preaching the Enlightenment in Scotland

In early 1777, Blair published a first volume of sixteen sermons, encouraged, he said, by his friend, Lord Kames; Blair extensively revised and polished the sermons, because he feared that ‘sermons announced by *The Professor of Rhetorick and Belles Lettres in the University of Edinburgh* may probably draw some criticism’. Volumes of sermons were not at this time proving marketable, and apparently only Samuel Johnson’s strong recommendation convinced the London publishing firm of Strahan and Cadell to agree to co-publish the volume in conjunction with an Edinburgh

⁴³ Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 74-92.

⁴⁴ K. O’Brien, ‘Robertson’s Place in the Development of Eighteenth-Century Narrative History’, in S. J. Brown (ed.), *William Robertson and the Expansion of Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 75, 83-4.

publisher. They need not have worried. The volume was an immediate success, going into a fourth printing within six months; it was the first Scottish devotional work to find strong sales in England. Blair brought out a second volume of sermons in 1780. The Scottish earl of Mansfield ('elegant Murray) read selections of this volume to George III and his consort, Charlotte. In consequence, the royal couple became warm admirers, and in 1780, the King awarded Blair an annual pension of £200; according to the historian Grey Graham, the King expressed a wish 'that every youth in the kingdom might possess a copy of the Bible and of Blair'.⁴⁵ Over 35,500 copies of the first two volumes of his sermons were in print by 1785.⁴⁶ Blair published a third volume of sermons in 1790, a fourth in 1794 and the fifth, and final volume, which he prepared in his final months, appeared posthumously in 1801, a year after his death.

Taken together, the five volumes included a total of eighty-nine sermons. Most of the sermons explored themes relating to the benevolence of the creator, practical Christian morality, and the role of Christianity in social improvement. Blair intended the sermons to be popular, that is, 'to make impression on the people; to strike and to seize their hearts'.⁴⁷ They included introspective explorations of human nature; indeed, insisted his first biographer, Blair's success as a preacher 'rests upon no circumstance so much as upon the knowledge he had acquired of the human heart'.⁴⁸ While the sermons were broadly orthodox in their Reformed theology, they neglected doctrinal issues or close analysis of biblical texts. There was no attention to hell, Christ's atonement, or the need for personal conversion by accepting Christ's

⁴⁵ H. Blair to [W. Strahan], 29 October 1776, National Library of Scotland, Ms. 1707, fols. 4-5; Schmitz, *Hugh Blair*, pp. 81-84; Sher, *The Enlightenment and the Book*, 245-6; H. Grey Graham, *Scottish Men of Letters in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1908), 128.

⁴⁶ Sher, 'Blair, Hugh', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 6, 79-82.

⁴⁷ Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belle Lettres*, quoted in Sher, *Church and University in the Scottish Enlightenment*, 170.

⁴⁸ Hill, *Life and Writings of Hugh Blair*, 134.

sacrifice on the cross. (Blair once privately confided to James Boswell that he did not believe in 'the eternity of punishment').⁴⁹ The overall message of the sermons was an optimistic one, emphasising the prospects of individual and social improvement.

A major theme running through the five-volumes of sermons was the providential ordering of the universe. In his sermon 'On the Creation of the World', he presented the Newtonian vision of a universe infinite in its dimensions, with an unimaginable vastness of space and a multiplicity of heavenly bodies moving in their orbits according to constant natural laws.⁵⁰ Significantly, he maintained that the Genesis narrative of creation, with its chronology of thousands of years, referred merely to the creation of 'this globe', and that probably many inhabited worlds had existed before this one in the vastness of time, and many inhabited worlds now existed across the vastness of space. For, he insisted of the creator, 'boundless is the extent of his dominion'. Before this world was created, Blair observed, 'other globes and worlds, enlightened by other suns, may then have occupied, as they appear [now] to occupy, the immense regions of space. Numberless orders of beings, to us unknown, people the wide extent of the universe, and afford an endless variety of objects to the ruling care of the great Father of all'.⁵¹ The natural order of this world represented the awesome power and wisdom of God – a God who not only directed the movement of planets and stars across endless space, but also ordered every detail of the natural world. 'The same wisdom that places the sun in the centre of the system ... has no less shown itself in the provision made for the food and dwellings of

⁴⁹ Diary entry for 23 February 1785, in the *Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle*, edited by G. Scott and F. A. Pottle, 18 vols. (New York: W. E. Rudge, 1928-1934), vol. 16 (1783-1786), 70-71.

⁵⁰ His knowledge of astronomy and the Newtonian cosmology probably came from his cousin and friend, Dr Robert Blair, a surgeon, who had, according to Hugh Blair, also achieved eminence in 'astronomy & optics'. H. Blair to Very Rev Dr McCormick, Principal of United Colleges, St Andrews, 13 August 1785, National Library of Scotland, Ms. 3112, fols. 30-31; A. M. Clerke and A. McConnell, 'Blair, Robert (1748-1828)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, vol. 6, 91.

⁵¹ H. Blair, 'On the Creation of the World', in *Sermons by Hugh Blair*, vol. 3 (London, 1790), 393-4.

every bird that roams the air, and every beast that wanders in the desert; equally great, in the smallest, and in the most magnificent objects; in the star, and in the insect ...'⁵²

The creation of this world with all its teeming variety of life, he insisted, must inspire awe and astonishment.

Even more sublime and awesome, he insisted in a companion sermon, 'On the Dissolution of the World', would be the end of this world, when volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods and storms would see 'the whole frame of nature fall into ruins' and the physical world 'fall back into chaos'. Those alive would witness 'universal nature tending to ruin. They shall feel the globe shake; shall behold their cities fall; and the final conflagration begin to kindle around them'.⁵³ With the end of the world, Blair observed, would also come the end of all human designs, all 'human glory' and all human progress. 'The beauties of nature, the decorations of art, the labours of industry, perish in one common flame' and the earth, 'like a star fallen from the heavens, shall be effaced from the universe, and *its place shall know it no more*'.⁵⁴ And yet amid the vicissitudes of the universe, Blair insisted, God's order remained constant over a creation that was a continual process of becoming. 'Life only changes its form, and is renewed. Creation is ever filling, but never full'. 'Amidst all those changes of nature, the Great Ruler himself remains *without variableness or shadow of turning* From his eternal throne, he beholds worlds rising and passing away'.⁵⁵ God's character, Blair insisted in another sermon, was unchangeable and immutable; this was an aspect of its perfection.⁵⁶

⁵² *Ibid.*, 401.

⁵³ H. Blair, 'On the Dissolution of the World', *Sermons*, vol. 3, 425, 417.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 421-22.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 433.

⁵⁶ H. Blair, 'On the Unchangeableness of the Divine Nature', in *Sermons by Hugh Blair*, vol. 2, (London, 1780), 85-116.

For Blair, divine providence continually directed the workings of the universe. He rejected the deist notion of a God that 'had erected this stupendous fabrick of the universe, had beautified it with so much ornament, and peopled it with such a multitude of rational beings', only to allow 'its affairs to float about at random'.⁵⁷ While through such natural forces as gravity and inertia, the heavenly bodies 'appear to move themselves in a free course', in truth God 'is ever directing the sun and the moon, the planets, stars and comets, in their course through the heavens'.⁵⁸ The sublime spectacle of nature, Blair believed, should 'fill the mind with reverential awe'.⁵⁹ And just as God directed the movements of stars and planets, so too did God direct the events of the human society for his higher purposes. Moreover, each individual could also feel in his or her life the continual operations of providence. 'In how many instances, my friends, have you found, that you are held in subjection to a higher Power, on whom depends the accomplishment of your wishes and your designs'.⁶⁰ The contemplation of nature, society and personal experience should inspire each individual with deep feelings of dependence on the divine.

A further theme running through Blair's published sermons was the importance of the passions as driving forces in human affairs, and the vital role of religion in controlling and disciplining the passions. The passions, Blair observed, (following such authors as Hutcheson, Hume and Smith) were vital to human experience; they were what made us human. 'The passions', he maintained, 'are strong emotions of the mind, occasioned by the view of apprehended good or evil. They are original parts of the constitution of our nature; and therefore, to extirpate

⁵⁷ H. Blair, 'On the Government of Human Affairs by Providence', *Sermons by Hugh Blair*, vol. 5 (London, 1801), 409.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

⁵⁹ H. Blair, 'On Devotion', *Sermons by Hugh Blair*, [vol. 1], (London, 1777), 277.

⁶⁰ H. Blair, 'On the Government of Human Affairs by Providence', *Sermons*, vol. 5, 412.

them is a mistaken aim.’⁶¹ They were also the source of human misery. In a frequently cited sermon, ‘On the Disorders of the Passions’, he reflected on how the passions could lead to a spirit of rebellion against human authority, and even more fundamentally, against God’s authority. At the root of this rebellious spirit was a gnawing sense of injustice in the social order, and a consequent rage against the apparently ‘promiscuous distribution made by Providence, of its favours among men’.⁶² This included not only the distribution of wealth and hereditary status in the world, but also of the seeming arbitrary endowment of some individuals with innate ability, sound health, strength or physical attractiveness. Envy of the prosperity, physical endowments or good luck of others leads to brooding over one’s fate, a gloomy magnifying of slights against one’s person, and then to malice, hatred and acts of violence. ‘In this manner, every criminal passion, in its progress, swells and blackens; and what was at first a small cloud ... is soon found to carry the tempest in its womb’.⁶³ For Blair, envy was ‘universally admitted to be one of the blackest passions in the human heart’, as it acted to undermine the ‘instincts of kindness and compassion which belong to our frame’ and thus destroy the sense of mutual dependence that by the ‘great law of nature’ formed the foundation of society.⁶⁴ But rage over personal misfortune, undeserved suffering, or the death of loved ones, could also foment bitterness. ‘Resentment’, he observed, ‘... if not kept within due bounds, is in hazard of rising into fierce and cruel revenge’.⁶⁵ Such passions would eat away at the individual’s heart and bring mental turmoil and evil intentions. ‘The minds of bad men’, he maintained, ‘are always disorderly ... spleen and disgust pursue them

⁶¹ H. Blair, ‘On the Government of the Heart’, part 2, *Sermons*, vol. 2, 54.

⁶² H. Blair, ‘On the Disorders of the Passions’, *Sermons*, vol. 2, 183.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 201-02.

⁶⁴ H. Blair, ‘On Envy’, *Sermons*, vol. 3, 150-51.

⁶⁵ H. Blair, ‘On Patience’, *Sermons*, vol. 3, 232-3.

through all the haunts of amusement. Pride and ill-humour torment them'.⁶⁶ Dark passions would eventually bring hatred of life, hatred of self, hatred of God, and even mental derangement. 'The disorders of the mind, having then arisen to their height, become of all things the most dreadful. The shame of folly, the violence of passion, and the remorse of guilt, acting in conjunction, have too frequently driven men to the last and abhorred refuge, of seeking relief in death from a life too embittered to be any longer endured.'⁶⁷

The passions were integral to human nature, and could not be eliminated. They were the forces that shaped and moved the social world in all its complexity. 'The wide circle of human society', he observed, 'is diversified by an endless variety of characters, dispositions and passions. Uniformity is, in no respect, the genius of the world'. The passions also continually threatened conflict and social breakdown. It was inevitable that the passions of different individuals 'shall jar, and interfere with each other', leading to 'irritation', discord, clashes and even violence.⁶⁸ Thus, the passions had to be brought under control and regulation both for the mental health of the individual and for the peace and harmony of society. However, passions could not be controlled by human reason alone. 'For arguments may convince the understanding', but 'they cannot conquer the passions'; in the heat of passion, rational arguments 'often vanish into smoke'.⁶⁹ 'Passion', he insisted, 'is loud and impetuous; and creates a tumult which drowns the voice of reason'. More than this, the tumult of the passions overpowered and corrupted human reason. Passion distorted the voice of reason to its own uses, until reason could no longer be trusted as a guide; passion

⁶⁶ H. Blair, 'On the Mixture of Joy and Fear in Religion', *Sermons*, vol. 1, 414.

⁶⁷ H. Blair, 'On the Joy, and the Bitterness of the Heart', *Sermons*, vol. 3, 269.

⁶⁸ H. Blair, 'On Patience', *Sermons*, vol. 3, 221.

⁶⁹ H. Blair, 'On Devotion', *Sermons*, vol. 1, 263.

joins artifice to violence; and seduces at the same time that it impels.

For it employs the understanding to impose upon the conscience. It

devises reasons and arguments to justify the corruptions of the heart.

‘By such a process as this’, he continued, ‘...a great part of mankind advance from step to step in sin, partly hurried by passion, and partly blinded by self-deceit By inveterate habits, their judgement is at length perverted’.⁷⁰ ‘Let us be persuaded’, he observed in another sermon, ‘that moments of passion are always moments of delusion’.⁷¹

Religion, for Blair, should assist reason and conscience in governing the passions. ‘Religion’, he observed of the passions, ‘requires not more of us, than to moderate and rule them’. The calming of the ‘agitation of passion’ and the *‘peaceful keeping the mind and heart’*, he maintained, ‘... is no where to be found but under the *pavilion of the Almighty*’.⁷² The passions, when properly governed and directed, could be useful for personal development and social improvement, inspiring individuals to achieve social good through strenuous effort, courage, and sacrifice. Passions, Blair observed, ‘rouse the dormant powers of the soul’. ‘They often raise’, he continued, ‘a man above himself, and render him more penetrating, vigorous, and masterly Actuated by some high passion, he conceives great designs, and surmounts all difficulties in the execution’.⁷³ The passionate love of praise, for example, if rightly directed could inspire individual acts of ‘magnanimity, generosity, and fortitude’; however, if unbridled that same love of praise would lead to hypocrisy, servility and treachery.⁷⁴ The key to the ‘command of passion’ was ‘self-denial’, and this was of the essence of religion. For Blair, religious self-denial did not mean

⁷⁰ H. Blair, ‘On the Character of Hazael’, *Sermons*, vol. 2, 345-6.

⁷¹ H. Blair, ‘On Moderation’, *Sermons*, vol. 3, 259.

⁷² H. Blair, ‘On the Influence of Religion upon Adversity’, *Sermons*, vol. 1, 45, 46-7.

⁷³ H. Blair, ‘On the Government of the Heart’, part 2, *Sermons*, vol. 2, 55.

⁷⁴ H. Blair, ‘On the Love of Praise’, *Sermons*, vol. 2, 148-77.

asceticism or self-inflicted misery. Rather, it meant subsuming the passions to a higher social purpose. 'It consists in our being ready, on proper occasions, to abstain from pleasure, or to submit to suffering, for the sake of duty or conscience, and from a view to some higher and more extensive good'.⁷⁵

True Christian devotion, for Blair, consisted in the 'lively exercise' of the human passions in seeking 'the favour of the Supreme Being'.⁷⁶ The devout person was filled with awe at the sublime majesty of the universe, and this sense of awe led to the 'entire resignation of the soul to God'. Devotion required both reason and sensibility. Without the exercise of the passions, reason alone would have 'small influence over human life'.⁷⁷ Without the direction of reason, religious passions would lead inevitably to superstition or enthusiasm. And without a sense of the divine, expressed through the conscience, neither reason nor the passions could be controlled, at least not for the 'bulk of mankind' who are 'impelled by their feelings'. Religion, he insisted, was 'the great purifier of the affections'.⁷⁸ Devotion, moreover, did not consist in a retreat from the world, nor did it mean severity towards people of different beliefs. True devotion 'was intended to fit us for discharging the duties of life. We serve God, by being useful to one another'.⁷⁹ Religious devotion regulated the passions, and developed human character for disciplined service in the world.

Blair's sermons placed emphasis on character studies, as examples of how religion could enable individuals to control their passions for higher ends.⁸⁰ Blair's close friend, William Robertson, was making a colourful use of character studies in his histories – including studies of Mary Stuart, Charles V, Columbus, Cortez, the

⁷⁵ H. Blair, 'On the Government of the Heart' (2), *Sermons*, vol. 2, 62.

⁷⁶ H. Blair, 'On Devotion', *Sermons*, vol. 1, 265, 270.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 272, 283.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 283, 286.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 295.

⁸⁰ Matheson, *Theories of Rhetoric*, 199; McCain, 'Preaching in Eighteenth Century Scotland', 135.

Pizarro brothers, or Alexander the Great – as examples of the difficulties of controlling the passions. Many of Blair's character studies were of a general nature – the 'moral man', 'wise man' or 'man of candour', or the character of 'imperfect goodness'. He also drew character studies from Scripture and used them to explore the struggle of the rational mind with the passions. For example, his sermon, 'On the Character of Joseph', explored how the Old Testament figure had managed to moderate and overcome his passion for revenge, in stark contrast to his brothers, who had been driven by the passions of envy and jealousy to commit their 'atrocious deed' of selling him into slavery.⁸¹ His sermon, 'On the Moral Character of Christ', highlighted Christ's command over the passions of his human nature. 'The example of Christ', Blair observed, 'holds forth for our imitation his steady command of temper amidst the highest provocations'. 'Though he had', Blair continued, 'revenge always in his power, he constantly declined it'.⁸²

What was notably absent from Blair's sermons was discussion of the 'peculiar doctrines' of Reformed theology, as conveyed in the Westminster Confession of Faith. This great-grandson of a prominent Covenanter gave no attention to unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace or the perseverance of the saints. As was the case with other Moderate clergy of the Church of Scotland, Blair did not challenge or question these doctrines of the Westminster Confession; rather, he simply set them aside. Blair's sermons did to be sure explore the workings of Providence, God's will for humankind and the promise of an afterlife. He preached Christ's divinity, Christ's atonement for the sins of humankind, and Christ's role as redeemer of the world – though he also observed that these were truths beyond human comprehension. He acknowledged that the 'prophecies, visions, types, and figures' of

⁸¹ H. Blair, 'On the Character of Joseph', *Sermons*, vol. 2, 309-34.

⁸² H. Blair, 'On the Moral Character of Christ', *Sermons*, vol. 5, 63.

the Old Testament had pointed to the coming of Christ, but maintained that these ‘mysteries’ had been directed to the simple understandings of the ancient Hebrew people, and that with the coming of Christ, ‘the obscurity of oracles, and the ambiguities of types, vanished’ and ‘the law, with its priests, its sacrifices, and its rites’ retired from sight.⁸³ He depicted the fall of humankind and original sin largely as metaphors for the bitter fruits of unruly passions. ‘When man revolted from his Maker, his passions rebelled against himself; and from being originally the instruments of reason, have become the tyrants of the soul’.⁸⁴ The remedy for sin was following Christ’s example in disciplining the passions. He suggested that the Last Judgement as depicted in Scripture, with the consignment of souls to eternal punishment, may also have been a metaphor.⁸⁵

One of his most influential sermons, ‘On our Imperfect Knowledge of a Future State’, took for its text, 1 Corinthians 13: 12 (‘For now we see through a glass darkly’) and developed the argument that God intentionally kept knowledge of the afterlife and the eternal fate of the individual shrouded in darkness. The purpose of this life, Blair observed, was ‘man’s improvement’ through sustained, disciplined endeavour within a social setting; man was a social creature and developed his character in social interactions. ‘If there be any principle fully ascertained by religion’, Blair asserted, ‘it is, That this life was intended for a state of trial and improvement to man. His preparation for a better world required a gradual purification carried on by steps of progressive discipline.’ There was in this world a continual conflict between moral duty to others, and selfish gratification – ‘between faith and sense, between conscience and desire, between present pleasure and future good’. ‘In this conflict’, he continued,

⁸³ H. Blair, ‘On the Death of Christ’, *Sermons*, vol. 1, 126, 127.

⁸⁴ H. Blair, ‘On the Government of the Heart’ part 2, *Sermons*, vol. 2, 56.

⁸⁵ H. Blair, ‘On the Last Judgement’, *Sermons*, vol. 5, 473-4.

the souls of good men are tried, improved, and strengthened. In this field, their honours are reaped. Here are formed the capital virtues of fortitude, temperance, and self-denial; moderation in prosperity, patience in adversity, submission to the will of God, and charity and forgiveness to men, amidst the various competitions of worldly interest.⁸⁶

This ‘plan of Divine wisdom for man’s improvement’, he insisted, would be thwarted if humanity had a clear idea of its future life. With certain fore-knowledge of the afterlife before them, individuals would devote little attention to the social duties and vocations of this world; they would be blinded by the dazzling prospect of the afterlife and would neglect the ‘proper business of this life’. Such a vision of their eternal prospects ‘would excite feelings too strong for us to bear; in a word, would unfit us for thinking or acting like human creatures’.⁸⁷ Thus, fore-knowledge of a future state ‘must clearly appear to the eye of Reason, to be the most fatal gift which the Almighty could bestow’.⁸⁸

Here Blair was preaching a version of the Calvinist teaching that individuals in this life can have no assurance of their eternal salvation – but he was transposing it into a worldly key. For him, individuals could have no clear vision of their eternal fate, because Providence intended this world to be a place for the gradual improvement of character, a setting for the disciplining of the passions through active engagement in social life. Christ had come into the world to bring an end to priests, sacrifices, rites, visions, oracles and prophecies, to provide an example of how to control and direct the passions for social harmony, and thus to form and shape human

⁸⁶ H. Blair, ‘On our Imperfect Knowledge of a Future State’, *Sermons*, vol. 1, 96-7.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 107; for valuable analyses of this sermon, see T. Ahnert, ‘The Soul, Natural Religion and Moral Philosophy in the Scottish Enlightenment’, *Eighteenth-Century Thought*, 2:3 (2004), 244-6, and A. Broadie, *The Scottish Enlightenment* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005), 147-9.

character in a manner that would be pleasing in God's eyes. Religion, for Blair, meant largely the cultivation of habits of moderation and temperance, and a uniting of reason and passion with a fear of God growing out of contemplation of the sublime power and versatility of nature.

The Legacy

Blair's sermons were highly influential expressions of the mature Scottish Enlightenment. The published sermons went through edition after edition, were translated into a number of languages and were found in homes throughout the North Atlantic world. They appealed to an educated elite that was embracing the language of sentiment and emotion, amid what John Dwyer has termed 'the age of the passions'.⁸⁹ The sermons joined other literary explorations of the passions, sensibility and the sublime, including Edmund Burke's essay on *The Sublime and the Beautiful* of 1757, the poems of Ossian published in the 1760s, Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Julie, ou la nouvelle Héloïse* of 1761, Henry Mackenzie's *The Man of Feeling* of 1771, or Goethe's *Die Leiden des jungen Werthers* (*The Sorrows of Young Werther*) of 1774. Blair was not an original philosophical thinker. His views on the passions and their power to dominate both reason and the will were drawn from others and would have been familiar to many of his readers. Rather, Blair's gift lay in his ability to synthesize the ideas of Hutcheson, Hume, Smith and other thinkers, and to relate those views to a practical Christian morality in clear and vivid prose. His sermons helped spread the views on human nature of the later Enlightenment to a larger public, including many who would not have read learned philosophical treatises. Blair's writings, according to Anne Matheson, both reflected and promoted this 'new

⁸⁹ Dwyer, *The Age of the Passions*, especially, 1-13.

language of ideas relating to feeling, benevolence, passion, sublimity and taste' that had come into prominence in the second half of the eighteenth century. According to Samuel Monk's path-breaking study of *The Sublime*, Blair's writings 'reflected much of the changing taste that goes to make up pre-romanticism'.⁹⁰

Blair's published sermons also contributed to a late eighteenth-century religious ethos that placed increasing emphasis on the sentiments and passions, on a practical morality based on the teachings and character of Jesus, and on a personal, introspective religion of the heart. He was one of those who, across Europe, were finding God in the 'sublime and the beautiful' of nature, and also in the quiet 'inner voice' of reasonable devotion as it struggled with the raging torrent of the passions. Blair, to be sure, was a leading Moderate in the Church of Scotland, and as such was opposed to the more vehement preaching of what was variously termed the 'Orthodox', 'Popular', 'Evangelical' or 'Wild' party in the Church, with their vivid depictions of hell and their strident entreaties for personal conversion through acceptance of Christ's sacrifice on the cross. Unlike many Methodist and evangelical preachers of the day, Blair did not warn sinners of eternal damnation or proclaim a gospel of personal salvation to the labouring orders. 'This volume', observed one critic in 1779 of Blair's first volume of sermons, 'so much admitted in the world by men of all sorts, contains no gospel to the poor; – no good news to the weary and the heavy-laden; no healing to the broken-hearted'.⁹¹

Blair did, however, bring an intensity of feeling to his preaching, including vivid depictions of the sublime in nature, psychological explorations into the power and versatility of the passions, and appeals to the Christian faith as the key to controlling the passions. Blair's published sermons provided dramatic expressions of

⁹⁰ Matheson, *Theories of Rhetoric*, 94; S. H. Monk, *The Sublime: A Study of Critical Theories in XVIII-Century England* (New York: MLA, 1935), 129.

⁹¹ Anon., *Letters on Dr Blair's Sermons* (Edinburgh, 1779), 12.

the struggle of devotion and the passions, while remaining free of any taint of enthusiasm or fanaticism. In his warmly emotive language, he shared much in common with a new breed of preachers who were emerging in Reformed Geneva from the mid eighteenth century. In 1750, for example, Jacob Vernet, the leading figure in Geneva's Christian Enlightenment, provided the preface to a work on the sentiments, in which he asserted that God guided individuals, 'not just by way of reasoning, but by way of instinct and sentiment'.⁹² Other Genevan-educated preachers who came to prominence from the mid-eighteenth century, among them Guillaume Laget, Pierre Mouchon, and Daniel de Rochemont, combined a similar commitment to a reasonable Christianity with emotive appeals with appeals to sentiment and a heart-felt religion. The immense sales of Blair's sermons were an expression of a larger tendency among European intellectuals to embrace an emotive Christian faith, especially after the end of the century. This tendency embraced such diverse figures as François-René de Chateaubriand in Catholic France, the poet Robert Southey in England, and the circle in Jena (Prussia) surrounding August and Friedrich Schlegel and Dorothea Mendelssohn.

It is significant that a member of the Jena circle in the 1790s, the young German Reformed theologian, Friedrich Schleiermacher, was influenced by Blair. In 1794-95, Schleiermacher co-operated with his mentor, the theologian, Friedrich Samuel Sack, in translating the fourth volume of Blair's sermons into German; it was Schleiermacher's first published work. Schleiermacher then translated on his own the fifth volume of Blair's sermons, between 1801 and 1802.⁹³ In between these two translations, in 1799, Schleiermacher published his celebrated *Reden über die*

⁹² Rosenblatt, 'The Christian Enlightenment', 293.

⁹³ K. Nowak, *Schleiermacher: Leben, Werk und Wirkung*, 2nd edn. (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2002), 72-73, 80. I am grateful to my colleague, Dr Paul Nimmo, for this reference. See also E. Boyer, Jr., 'Shaftesbury and the German Enlightenment', *Harvard Theological Review*, 96:2 (2003), 200.

Religion (On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers). In this work, he defined religion as ‘a sense and a taste for the infinite’ and endeavored to ground the religious sense in a primal feeling of dependence on a transcendent power. For Schleiermacher, Scriptural meaning was internalised, and emphasis placed on Scriptural metaphor.⁹⁴ This approach certainly bears some resemblance to that of Blair. Of course, many others read Blair’s sermons on both sides of the Atlantic; those sermons were, it should be recalled, one of the most successful publishing ventures of the Enlightenment. Blair was certainly not an Evangelical. However, in his focus on individual sentiment and emotions, on a religion of feeling and the heart, and on personal introspection, Blair did contribute to the renewal of vital Christianity – a renewal that included the Evangelical Revival but also revival movements in Roman Catholicism and Orthodoxy – that would transform the North Atlantic world during the era of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ R. Crouter, *Friedrich Schleiermacher: Between Enlightenment and Romanticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 60.

⁹⁵ S. J. Brown, ‘Movements of Christian Awakening in Revolutionary Europe’, in Brown and Tackett (eds.), *Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 7, 575-95.